

Barbara Hammer

text

version 1.0

For those new to experimental film and video or unfamiliar with the range of Barbara Hammer's career work, her choice of a chronological organization of each of her two shows at the Shelton provides the opportunity to see the complex development of a major media artist. With this arrangement the audience easily traces the evolution from a simple lyricism to a dense referentiality, from technically elementary means to elaborate production and post-production, from spontaneity and celebration to self-reflection and critique, from silence or simple soundtrack to richly elaborated and layered audio, from the screen as window on the world to screen as site for changing layers of consciousness and reflection.

At the same time such a format for a retrospective presents a potential problem. Inattentive or superficially sophisticated viewers may be puzzled with some work for not matching the canonical expectations of the avant garde or feminist establishments, and Hammer has always been a disturbing presence for both. And a too hasty labelling of her work characterizes much of the critical response to it. But her most significant work of the past decade demonstrates the mind and talent of a major North American artist who must be assessed and understood on her own terms. Understanding her originality demands breaking some of the easy commonplaces of current media criticism.

Hammer's most recent work gains depth from her technical mastery in the service of a deepened vision and understanding of life's possibilities and limits. In **Sanctus** she achieves a celebration of the body which is corporal and spiritual, presenting the amazement and joy of life simultaneously with the body's inevitable temporality. In **Still Point** she accomplishes a fusion of the personal and the political which maintains visual and aural contradiction in the service of a heightened sense of her own, and our own, practical and moral situations in the Reagan-Bush era. In **Vital Signs** she weaves postmodern media fragments with her own image in a danse macabre that recalls the unity of life and death in medieval art while updating the metaphors for the age of AIDS.

In retrospect, the continuity of cinematic exploration and personal embodiment of her concerns stands clear. The pairing of natural and social worlds mediated by individual vision and camera technology, the layering of images and their repeated reconsideration, the fracturing of consciousness by using the material alteration of film, the obsession with altering light as a fulcrum point between vision in consciousness and sight of the world--these are also major themes of the U.S. experimental film tradition, particularly as found in the history of "visionary film" described by critic P. Adams Sitney. Yet Barbara Hammer's work remains little known in that context, so much a male preserve.

From the perspective of her predecessors in women's experimental film work, however, Barbara Hammer clearly belongs at the center of tradition. Like Mary Ellen Bute's pioneering work in abstract lightpieces in the 30's, often filming from cathode ray tube

patterns, Hammer freely works visual rhythms and moves back and forth from film to video to computer in production and editing. Hammer has also followed Marie Menken's film strategies from the 40's and 50's with lyrical examinations of gardens and places, using paint to animate still images, and creating drastic satiric juxtapositions by optically printing images and appropriating scientific documentary and found sound. In the context of Hammer's work, other films by women experimentalists come to mind: Sara Arledge's deadpan mock exposition in the pre-Beat **What Is A Man?**, Shirley Clarke's intense optical printing in **Bridges Go Round**, the visual romanticism of Storm de Hirsch's lyrics and Chick Strand's documentaries, the whacky humor about women's bodies and lives in Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's **Schmeerguntz**, the exploration of the filmmaker's own body and unruly sexuality through alterations of film material and layered printing in Carolee Schneeman's **Fuses** and Joyce Weiland's examination of her body and domestic environment in **Water Sark**. In this context Hammer's hand crafted, visually dense, wildly romantic, disarmingly autobiographical, slyly satiric and comically celebratory concerns find a congenial place.

Placing Hammer within a tradition of North American women's experimental film makes much more sense than an earlier approach which tried to fit her into an essentialist "lesbian feminist aesthetic." Time and experience has shown that the push to a we're-all-alike politics of identity served unity and celebration at the expense of paying attention to crucial differences of race, class, age, experience and lifestyle. Hammer's recent work **Still Point** serves as her definitive reassessment of 70's cultural feminism. She literally places side by side the romantic image of her companion walking and stretching under the sun in a landscape and the gritty realism of a methodical garbage picker on the streets of New York City, pushing a shopping cart and moving on to the next waste container. Our world view must encompass both realities, the film indicates. Privilege can't obscure vision.

And yet her role as a feminist and lesbian media maker in the 70's needs to be understood. For many years, Barbara Hammer was almost alone as an out-of-the-closet lesbian filmmaker. Virtually excluded from the boy's club world of the film avant garde, she showed her own work in feminist bookstores, women's coffeehouses, and women's studies classrooms, often organizing the event and carting the equipment as well. Determined to promote women's media she organized weekend workshops and classes to teach women filmmaking skills, and set up screenings of women avant gardists from the past. She created her own distribution company, Goddess Films, to reach the audience. At the same time she produced film after film, taking every opportunity to make new work, learn new skills, try new techniques.

The mid-1970s works represent women's bodies as physical, gendered, and sexual, existing within a lesbian community. Some function primarily as filmed skits, such as Superdyke which enacts groups of women appearing in public space carrying shields emblazoned with "amazon" or dancing in the street in front of San Francisco's city hall. Simply showing young out lesbians in public provided empowering imagery for a group which had been denied filmic representation from their own point of view and free access to public space (precisely why annual Lesbian/Gay Pride parades are so important). The

film tends to directly illustrate ideas and those ideas are not necessarily shared by everyone in the intended audience. Fantasies of running through parks with bows and arrows like ancient amazons are not universal among homosexual women. At the same time, where the film succeeds best appears in documenting guerrilla theater fun such as finding a display of massage vibrators in a crowded department store and publicly appropriating the demonstration model for erotic joy.

The more private films of this period set in domestic space or rural retreat remain personal and compelling while revealing the artist trying to find new forms for representing women's bodies as objects of desire. *Dyketactics* presents a now-classic lovemaking film, with the camera not a distant voyeur or blunt close up recorder as in so much pornography, but a living and moving presence capturing and framing and reframing caresses and touching. *Women I Love* presents a series of portraits which show women in/and nature or in intimate settings in an often magical way. Opening a dishwasher reveals daffodils in bloom, and the flower reappears in a plastic speculum, and being actively kissed by one of the lovers. Another lover appears on a motorcycle trip, another in a forest glen. Lovemaking appears, not isolated, but as part of a continuum of nature and intimacy.

For some feminist critics, the romanticism of Hammer's work in the 1970s created a disturbing undercurrent. Some rejected what they viewed as her ideology of a separate mythic goddess spirituality or amazon culture. Some found images of naked women in pastoral nature a flight from reality and her autobiographical depictions of her own body and those of her lovers a recapitulation of masculine patterns of looking. Yet the abruptness of the critique fails to address other questions. Clearly, as we see this primary election season, the depiction of homosexuals in media art can become a rallying cry for Patrick Buchanan, and lead to Senator Jesse Helms decrying Marlon Riggs' video *Tongues Untied* for showing "naked dancing black homosexual men" on PBS. Hammer herself has mocked such hysteria in *No No Nooky TV*, an animation created on the Amiga computer which includes the machine speaking naughty words as well as drawing them, and even in a bit of cybernetic crossdressing wearing bras and underpants while sexually cavorting with the animator who smears the machine's face with paint.

To some extent Hammer's work overlapped with debates in the movement between universal biological and essentialist positions on the one hand and social-historical explanations for female and lesbian difference on the other. Not that the filmmaker didn't have something to add to the discussion. *Synch Touch* provides an argument that touch is an earlier and more primary than sight, but that the two are closely related, and it emphasizes the corporeality of visual perception. The film also wryly contradicts the argument of much psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory that verbal language provides the master model for consciousness--a position often favored by academic feminists who either ignored her work which hardly fit the heterosexual bias of their theorizing, or who distained Hammer's "essentialism." Her indirect response: the tongue can be used for more than talking.

By positioning Hammer's work as simply romantic, critics often inhibited appreciation of her remarkably different group of films and tapes in the 1980s when she turned from the female body set in romantic nature to a series of what she called "perceptual landscapes," that made her own investigation of the world's spatial and temporal dimension a key element. *Pond and Waterfall* puts woman in nature, but in a wet suit with an underwater housing around her camera. Air and water form a changing fluid boundary as changes of scale and distance, light and color shape and reshape perception.

Also in the 1980s her understanding of the body itself changed and deepened. The body's social nature came to be represented no longer as a circle of women cavorting in Northern California, but a body imbedded in contradiction and complication through the impact of government censorship and right wing repression, of AIDS hysteria in the media, of disease and dying, of aging, of environmental decay. *Optic Nerve* represents visiting her grandmother in a nursing home, and *Endangered* vanishing animal species. At the end of the 1980s when she re-entered her film and video work by again presenting her image, Hammer moved with a maturity that deepened the irony of her comedy, that opened the wonder and fear of the body and its often precarious life, that made the filmmaker's personal quest for loving relations deeply grounded in the social and historical moment.

Feminist film studies grants overwhelming attention to the dramatic feature film, either in critiquing the dominant, or looking for subversive subtexts in Hollywood representations, or trying to find feminist alternative narrative strategies. The second order of critical attention considers the substantial body of women's documentary on social issues. Concern for the lyrical avant garde mode and its complex intersection of the personal and the political, of perception and cognition, feeling and knowing, lags far behind. Yet Hammer's recent work deserves attention for addressing personal, aesthetic, and social issues with a complexity and density rare in fictional narrative or social documentary forms. From such an understanding, much of her earlier work can be taken in a fresher way, beyond some simplifications found in previous criticism.

Given the trajectory of her entire body of work to date, her persistent concern with perception, her sharp critical wit, and her longstanding work in animation and related techniques, her work must be considered as an analytically sophisticated development of forms and themes which begin in a romantic tradition but which have increasingly evolved into an intellectually critical and visually pleasurable experience. Hammer's films and tapes move beyond a naive response to the body and the natural environment, and beyond a postmodern attitude.

Barbara Hammer's evolving accomplishment in film and video art does what the best experimental work always does. It challenges the audience to new ways of thinking and feeling, new kinds of experience. It moves the boundaries for thinking of media art as well, creating space for a re-evaluation of the past and new issues for the future. In this it is profoundly optimistic. It assumes we can learn and change. Even when facing death, environmental disaster, social decay. Art is then not a retreat from the world but an

active engagement with it. The film/video maker faces the world and challenges it, not simply recording life but changing it.

Chuck Kleinhans
Radio/TV/Film Department
Northwestern University
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